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ABSTRACT

In Appalachian life and literature the past is intensely present. Many Appalachian college students buy into the myth of meritocracy, a myth which blames poverty on the poor and refuses to acknowledge the financial and social resources needed for success in this country. Part of their disregard for themselves and/or their neighbors has to do with language, especially how their language is different from standard English and how they are portrayed in literature. The southern Appalachian rural dialect is considered a signal for correction by most classroom teachers. An educator tries to help her English composition students recognize the importance of the past, but avoid simplistic, rosy pictures of bygone times, places, and people. She discusses why some grammars are considered more acceptable than others by teachers, and students are asked to read Thomas Hardy's "The Ruined Maid" as a model of the related pleasure and danger in using dialect. Students then are asked to write a poem in dialect, but to treat the subjects more respectfully than Hardy does. The impossibility of distinguishing the relative contributions of class bias and geographical bias are discussed, as is code-switching. Whether Hardy's poem patronizes rural women is also discussed. Modern Appalachian authors' works are also read, authors whose poems provide a complex picture of the present and the past and recognize the strengths of Appalachians without exaggerating stereotype characteristics. (NKA)

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At the Edge of the Past

In a sense, we all live at the edge of the past, but in Appalachian life and literature the past is intensely present. This is in most ways a strength, and one that is common to the life and work of other minority groups--who, like Appalachians, may partly be trying to recoup their losses. It can also be mere self-indulgence, when this attention to the past becomes overly romantic or sentimental. In English composition courses, I try to help my students to recognize the importance of the past, but to avoid simplistic, rosy pictures of bygone times, places, and people. This is particularly difficult in an economically exploited region in which students feel a strong pull to romanticize some elements of their culture because of perceived failures in other elements.

In southern Appalachia, particularly southern WV and eastern Kentucky, poverty rates are very high. The per capita income of some rural areas is among the lowest in the nation. This poverty is due, in large part, to the exploitative nature of the major industries of the early part of the 1900's---the extractive industries of timbering and coal mining. These industries have pretty much played themselves out, but their detrimental effects on the economy of the region are still much in evidence. Many of our students are poor, and many buy into the myth of meritocracy which proclaims success a function of individual genius and hard work. This myth, which blames poverty on the poor, refuses to acknowledge the financial and social resources needed for success in this country. Consequently, our students, whether graduate or undergraduate, tend to deprecate their own abilities or, if they belong to the local elite, deprecate the abilities of their

poor neighbors. Part of their disregard for themselves and/or their neighbors has to do with language, especially (1) how their language is different from standard English and (2) how they are portrayed in literature.

The southern Appalachian dialect, almost invisible to some of our working-class students because it is seldom called to their attention, is an embarrassment to many of those who are English and/or education majors. Students whose speech is characterized by usages more common to Appalachian rural speech, to Ozark mountain speech, or to any of a number of rural dialects or varieties, are likely to be regarded as deficient in language skills. Although rural speech is often admired aesthetically by ethnological purists, it is considered a signal for correction by most classroom teachers. This bias sends a clear message to rural students that they and their family are somehow deficient. For example, I observed a first-grader in an eastern Kentucky classroom, who used "warsh" instead of "wash" in an oral response in class; he was corrected by his teacher in the following manner: "We don't say "warsh" only hillbillies say that."

After a discussion about why some grammars are considered more acceptable than others in school and a discussion of how different grammars express the diversity of the population, I ask the students to read closely Thomas Hardy's "The Ruined Maid." This poem, written in dialect as a conversation between two country women, one of whom has come to live in the city, serves as a model of the related pleasure and danger in using dialect. After we read the poem, I ask my students to write a poem using dialect, but treating the subjects more respectfully than Hardy

does.

We also discuss the impossibility of distinguishing the relative contributions of class bias and geographical bias in deeming some dialects as substandard; both biases are at work in many cases, including bias against Appalachian dialect. I tell my students that a compromise suggested, i.e., to teach rural children to code-switch, but they and I question whether that is possible with dialects of a language, other than superficial vocabulary adaptations. Code-switching between two different languages seems reasonable; but once a child has learned to say "I came to see you yesterday," it's questionable whether she will think to switch back to "I come to see you yesterday," when she is at home. My students know that job-preparation and preparation for technical, scholarly, and creative writing may require standard grammar, but they're not sure that this can be achieved without a sacrifice of at least some of their original dialect.

Going beyond Appalachia to the concept of ruralness itself is also important in my efforts to ask students to recognize the importance of the past. Terms for rural people reflect a history of attitudes of superiority of urban over rural dwellers. Anyone who's taken an introductory Shakespeare class knows a "villain" was originally a "villein" or country person. Hick, rube, hayseed, clodhopper, yahoo, and even clown, which also used to mean a country person, are all derogatory terms coming out of that history. The stigma of speaking an Appalachian dialect is partly the stigma of being rural.

We then consider "The Ruined Maid" and discuss whether it is a poem that patronizes rural women. Most regard it as patronizing; some feel that the insights it provides or the skill with which it is realized render it aesthetically and/or socially important. Following this discussion, I ask my students to write a poem that reflects a stereotype of Appalachians, but redeems the person from stereotype by the end of the poem.

As a part of our study of Appalachian literature, we talk about changes since the late 1800's--especially differences in how Appalachian authors write about themselves compared to portrayals by authors who are not native Appalachian. We read the work of authors such as Linda Parsons, whose book *Home Fires* describes the experiences of a twentieth century Appalachian woman, taking care of home and her career; and we read *In Adversaria* by Tim Russell, who writes about working in a factory on the edge of Appalachia. These poetry collections provide a complex picture of the present and the past and recognize the strengths of Appalachians without exaggerating stereotypic characteristics. Students enjoy these works and use them as starting points for poems, stories, and essays.

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